

*A dedicated team of workers*

# Native American firefighters take part in the search and recovery efforts in Hemphill

By Joanne Hale

A group of about 60 Native American firefighters made their way up the stairwell quietly, deliberately marching toward Johnson Space Center's Mission Control Center (MCC). Once there, they gathered together, paying attention to every detail of MCC's history – just as they have paid meticulous attention to the woods of East Texas.

Tears could be seen in their eyes as Astronaut Catherine Coleman told them how they have played an important role in the future of spaceflight. They were honored to be here – to get a firsthand view of NASA.

JSC hosted several groups of firefighters and search and recovery workers in the weeks following the *Columbia* tragedy to show appreciation for their ongoing dedication and hard work in the search and recovery efforts in East Texas. The group on this particular day was comprised mostly of Native American firefighters who were dispatched to Hemphill from South Dakota, North Dakota, Utah and Wyoming following the crash of STS-107.

The group toured key areas of JSC including MCC, the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory and the Shuttle Viewing Room with their final stop culminating at Space Center Houston.

“We started our tour of Building 9 on the catwalk at the Space Station end,” said Barbara Tomaro, IMPASS contract supervisor of Protocol and Information Services. “There was a good deal of excitement and picture-taking and general living-in-space questions.”

As they moved down the catwalk, the Shuttle full-fuselage trainer came into view. At that point, there was a break in the conversations and picture-taking. “Each one silently tried to put what they had seen in the field in perspective with the enormity of the vehicle mockup before them. They seemed to be in awe,” Tomaro said.

She heard them saying they had no idea how big a Shuttle is and how the “large pieces” they had found in the field now seemed small in comparison.

Coleman addressed the group while they were touring the MCC and thanked them for their help in getting NASA back into spaceflight.

“I am here to represent the astronauts and to say thank you for what you are doing for the space program,” Coleman said. “Without the pieces of the puzzle, we can't get back into spaceflight as quickly. You are part of the team working to get us back into flight.”

Coleman assured the search and recovery teams that the crew of STS-107 was doing what they loved the most. “I can tell you with absolute confidence that the crewmembers of STS-107 were having the time of their lives,” Coleman said.

Many members of the group expressed their excitement over having an opportunity to visit JSC. “I am happy to be here. I really like meeting the astronauts and seeing JSC,” said Shawn Malevolence, second-year firefighter from Fort Duchesne, Utah. “I hope our efforts help the space program and the future of NASA.”

Justin Romero, a member of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from Eagle Butte, S.D., described the significance he feels at finding even the smallest pieces of debris.

“I am happy to be involved in the recovery effort. When I find pieces of the Shuttle I think to myself that I am holding a piece of history in my hands – all the way down to the little pieces – they are all important,” Romero said.

There were more than 1,000 search and recovery workers located in Hemphill, a town of only 800 residents. The workers were trained on site in search and recovery skills by several organizations including the Forest Service of Pierce County, WA.

Dan Hudson, search coordinator for the Forest Service of Pierce County, arrived in Hemphill the first week of February to train volunteers. Hudson said that he has never seen a more dedicated team of workers.

“We have never participated in something with such a huge significance. This is a fabulous group of people – they are very hard workers,” Hudson said. “It was hard to get them to space farther apart during their search because they were afraid they would miss something. It was phenomenal.”



*Top, Hemphill Search and Recovery workers tour Mission Control.*

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*Right, Native American firefighters, who took part in the Search and Recovery efforts in Hemphill, arrive at JSC.*

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